

23 DEC 1970

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Report on Survey Trip to Laos, 30 November - 14 December 1970

I. Purpose of the Trip

1. My trip was undertaken at the request of the Director of Central Intelligence for the purpose of conducting an intensive on-the-ground review of Agency-supported paramilitary operations in Laos against Pathet Lao and Vietnamese Communist forces. In this survey I directed particular attention to an examination of the concept of the military operations which we are supporting, the tactics employed by our forces and the effectiveness of their execution, command and control arrangements, and training. The primary covert action mission of our Vientiane Station is to provide covert support to the Royal Laotian Government in order to prevent Laos from falling under Communist domination and to contribute to the political stability of the Government.

II. Conclusions and Findings

The analysis which follows is based upon full and complete discussions with both American and indigenous leaders as well as personal visits to troops and to most troop locations throughout Laos.

A. Strategy

2. The dominant strategic factor in Laos is the enemy line of communication (LOC) through the panhandle into Cambodia and South Vietnam. Our objectives are to interdict the LOC and at the same time to maintain a neutral but free Laos, using indigenous ground and air forces, supplemented with U.S. air support. Americans are not permitted to accompany troops into combat, and

this introduces the most important limiting factor of this war -- our inability to influence the outcome of combat action except through prior persuasion during training as to what tactics they should pursue.

3. In my opinion we should stress mobile infantry tactics by small units. The disadvantage of this is that to be completely effective mobile tactics require a degree of leadership not found in the officers with whom we must work and a proficiency in training not yet achieved. The alternative of conventional and positional warfare with large units is even more unattractive, however, as it results in casualties which cannot be adequately replaced from the existing manpower base and in loss of morale, prestige, "face" and population control when defensive positional battles are lost - as they usually are to the more professional NVA regular Army.

4. At present Military Regions (MR) 1 and 3 believe in this concept and are using it. MR's 2 and 4 are only partially convinced and use these tactics only against the enemy LOC and fail to realize that population control can also be achieved by this method. I put the arguments for these mobile tactics most forcefully to both indigenous leaders and to Agency officers. I do not know if I convinced the Lao but I doubt it. Therefore it will be necessary for our officers to stress this constantly. The troop leaders must realize that launch and support bases need not be static but should move frequently; and that area and population control is much more readily won by troops in constant motion within the area rather than by static defense of a few population centers.

B. Tactics.

5. There is a lack of proficiency among the troops in small unit tactics. There does not seem to be adequate security on the march or in position. Scouts, flankers, patrols, and listening posts are often neglected or at best employed haphazardly. As a result surprises by the enemy are frequent, casualties are needlessly high and combat intelligence is almost nil. This has the additional residual effects of lowering morale and making the troops afraid to move. Instead of troops able to conduct securely rapid and damaging blows to the enemy, we find troops who are hesitant, slow and subject

to enemy reactive attacks before objectives are accomplished. This problem is most difficult of resolution because while Agency officers have a complete understanding of it, they are limited by the rules of the game to exhortation and persuasion and even then only during an uncertain training period.

C. Training.

6. As brought out above training is our most important project. It is only by training that we can correct lack of tactical proficiency, failure to perceive correct strategy and mediocre leadership.

7. Agency officers fully understand this but the Lao do not realize that training is an overriding requirement. Consequently, upon the advent of battle their first impulse is to cancel training and throw the trainees into the fray. We must fight this determinedly.

8. Another training failure is the absence of any comprehensive training program by which units are scheduled into training (and rest and rehabilitation) at fixed and definite intervals. A unit should fight, then rest, then absorb replacements, issue necessary equipment and train. Then the cycle is repeated. The troops must know this cycle is assured. When it is not, as at present, then morale goes down, exhaustion becomes prevalent and desertions increase. All of these symptoms are evident now among Lao and Meo troops. Correction will require constant effort with the Lao leadership by Agency officers.

9. The content of the training program is controlled by us and is generally satisfactory. We must make sure we emphasize mobile tactics by small units. For this purpose some of the instruction at Special Forces Center at Bragg may well be more appropriate for use in the Lao training courses than the more conventional lessons taught at Benning.

D. Command and Control.

10. The Lao Army regulars (FAR) and the guerrilla units seldom work together in coordination for achievement of a common objective. While such cooperation would entail a certain amount

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of security risk, I believe this to be outweighed by the benefits. Population control would be enhanced as would the defense of necessary logistic and training installations. We would gain a greater persuasive voice in the training and tactics of FAR. At present if a guerrilla unit is threatened it either flees or is reinforced. There is never any thought of maneuver by other friendly units so as to threaten the enemy with encirclement. We should continue to bend every effort to achieve this type of coordination.

11. Command and control of Agency activity and programs must be based on current up-to-date written guidance. General policy should come from the Director and implementing detailed instructions should then be prepared by Station for Base and for Units. Because we work daily and over a very wide area with many different indigenous leaders it is vital that we all sing from the same sheet of music as to our advice and persuasion.

E. Support.

12. Logistic and commo support including air transport is outstanding -- quickly responsive to all requirements. It must be so maintained.

13. Tactical air support is just adequate -- there is no excess. Requirements are hard -- there is no "water" to squeeze out. The battle successes we have we owe in very great measure to close tactical air support. Without it we will be lost. This cannot be emphasized too strongly and decisions must be taken now at the National Security Council level to replace the tactical air which is being withdrawn from Southeast Asia under the current Vietnamization plan. If it is not replaced and present sortie rates decrease in any significant degree the Laotians will stop fighting at once, with all of the attendant consequences.

F. Agency Personnel.

14. Our officers are outstanding. They are doing a superb job in the face of almost insuperable obstacles. Without any command authority and working with an almost completely unmartial, non-aggressive, illiterate people owing no real allegiance to a central Government or nation, they have maintained United States objectives in the area.

Recommendations:

1. Current up-to-date written guidance be provided the Station. If this report is approved it could serve as the basis for the Director's orders to the field on strategy, tactics and training.
2. Implementing instructions be prepared by Station for subordinates.
3. Requirements for air support be presented to higher authority for necessary decision.

R. E. Cushman, Jr.
R. E. Cushman, Jr.
Lieutenant General, USMC
Acting Director

Attachment:

Map

DDCI/RECushman:bjl
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